Master's Thesis of Global Sport Management

Athlete Brand Image, Self-brand Connection and Brand Credibility:

The Impact of Athlete Brand Image on Brand Credibility

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Abstract

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Every year, many firms and brands spend a large amount of money to sponsor athlete endorsers. Athlete endorsement has a significant impact on brand credibility and consumer purchase intention. This study was aimed to understand the effect of athlete brand image on forming self-brand connection and eventually, how it impacts on brand credibility. Additionally, the study was aimed to examine how athlete-brand congruence would moderate the relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection.

Participants were recruited from an online research panel in South Korea. After data cleaning, a total of 319 samples were included in the data analysis. The questionnaire included questions related to the athlete brand image (on-field and off-field attributes), athlete-brand congruence, self-brand connection and the credibility of the endorsed brand.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics analysis and reliability analysis were conducted using SPSS 25.0. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and validity analysis were conducted using AMOS 25.0. Structural equation model analysis (SEM) was performed to verify the hypothesis.

The results of this study are as follows. First, athlete's on-field images were positively associated with the self-brand connection. Second, athlete's off-field images are positively associated with the self-brand connection. Third, self-brand connection was positively associated with brand credibility. Fourth, athlete-brand congruence was not moderated on the relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

It is a popular strategy in advertising to use celebrities for promoting a product (Shimp, 2000 as cited in Choi & Rifon, 2012) and it is no exception for sport marketing field. Among the most popular celebrity endorsers, athlete endorsement has become a topic of great interest to many organizations (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). Today's athletes often motivate their fans, and many athletes serve as multiplatform promotional entities that draw attention from media and corporate sponsors (Arai et al., 2013). Therefore, many sporting firms use athletes as brand endorsers because they are believed as highly dynamic, with attractive and appealing personal qualities (Atkins & Block, 1983).

Using celebrities as endorsers can be an effective strategy for several reasons: they are seen as entertaining and trustworthy (Atkin & Block, 1983), help maintaining recall of the brand (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), lead to greater believability of the product (Kamins et al., 1989), and create positive word of mouth communications (Bush et al., 2004). Athletes are considered not only as cultural products that can be sold as brands but also as process of product endorsement (Gilchrist, 2005). It is not much to say that some athletes have already become themselves as brands. For example,

LeBron James signed endorsement contracts for over $90 million with Nike and Upper Deck trading cards before he was even drafted by a professional basketball team (CBS News, 2003). Nike's contract with Lebron James was not only to use him as a product endorser but use him as a brand itself.

Moreover, there are numerous sport agencies that provide a wide range or marketing opportunities to their clients. For example, CAA, recognized by Forbes as "The World's Most Valuable Sports Agency," describes their sports endorsements as "We connect athletes and brands to create a wide range of revenue and marketing opportunities, including endorsements, appearances, philanthropy, memorabilia, licensing, digital, social and equity partnerships" (CAA). It is predicted that well-branded athletes who carry symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers.

Arai et al. (2013) compared the difference between endorsement and athlete brand; the goals of endorsement studies are more about how to sell the product by using the 'right' athletes (Erdogan, 1999) whereas athlete branding studies try to understand an athlete as a brand to deliver effective marketing strategies. Though these two areas have different objectives, Arai et al. (2013) posits that the literature on endorsers' image can be implemented to understanding of athlete brand image.

While athletes are used as brands, consumers often use these brands and products to create and represent self-images and to present these images to others (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In athlete endorsement context, consumers try to find meanings that are related to athletes to create individual sense of self (McCracken, 1989). Once a self-brand connection is developed, consumers may use that knowledge for their marketing activity with the brand (Keller, 1993). If consumers perceive high levels of brand awareness and positive brand image, it will likely increase their loyalty toward the brand, and eventually increase purchase intention. Thus, development of self-brand connection by consumer may affect customer-based brand equity.

Keller (1993) defined customer-based brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p.2). That is, when consumers are familiar with the brand and have positive feeling toward the brand, customer-based brand equity may occur (Keller, 1993). Brand signaling theory highlights the role of credibility as the key factors of consumer-based brand equity (Erdem & Swait, 1998).

That is, higher brand credibility may increase consumer's perception of brand quality (Erdem & Swait, 1998). For example, if consumer is unclear about the information, credibility of a brand can help forming an

information. Therefore, in this article, brand credibility is examined as a consumer-based brand equity factor and its relationship with athlete brand image will be also examined.

1.2. Research Objective

Athlete branding has become a hot topic of academic analysis (Kunkel et al., 2020) as it plays an important role in sport marketing field. Past athlete and celebrity endorsement research have examined the 'image' that influences the effectiveness of celebrities and athletes as product endorsers (Arai et al., 2013). For example, Ohanian (1991) examined the impact of celebrity spokespersons' perceived image on consumers' purchase intentions. Her study examined three elements of source credibility and their impact on consumer's purchase intention. The result indicated that the celebrity's perceived expertise was the only significant factor that affects consumer's intention to purchase products (Ohanian, 1991).

Recent studies have suggested that brand image has impact on consumer's attitudinal and behavioral outcomes associated with the athlete and related entities. For example, Carlson & Donavan (2013) posited that consumers are more likely to purchase team-related paraphernalia once identified with the athlete. They have attempted to use athlete's brand image to increase team-related spectatorship. Kunkel et al. (2020) examined the

relationship between athlete's on- and off-field image and fan's commitment toward athlete, team, and athlete sponsor preference. The findings indicated that on-field attributes are more effective for having positive attitude toward athlete's associated sponsors whereas off-field attributes influence more on fan's connection with the athlete (Kunkel et al. 2020).

Previous studies have also examined the relationship between endorser credibility and brand credibility. Spry et al. (2009) used Cate Blanchett as an example, who is perceived to be highly trustworthy celebrity from supporting environmental causes. When she endorses SK-II products, her trustworthy image affects consumers' perceptions of the brand's credibility. Therefore, the author assumed that high endorser credibility would lead to higher brand credibility (Spry et al., 2009). In athlete endorsement context, it is important to examine how athletes are perceived to consumers to develop athlete credibility. There is, however, limited research on how athlete brand image affects the credibility of the endorsed brand.

Today, many athletes achieve their status not only through their outstanding on-field performance but also by their distinct lifestyle (Choi & Rifon, 2007). For example, Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the most famous football players in the world not just because of his stunning performance

on the field but also because of his non-soccer successes. His image as a great father, fashion model, and charity ambassador has a strong influence on consumers' image of him. In this article, athlete brand image will be examined which is consisted of two elements; on-field attributes and off-field attributes.

Individuals have different aspect of seeing an athlete brand image depending on what brand associations they put in priority. For example, if a consumer values athlete's performance much more than morality, the credibility of Cristiano Ronaldo would not be much influenced when he was fined for tax fraud. On the other hand, if a consumer values morality more than performance, the credibility of Cristiano Ronaldo would be affected. This assumption can be explained through consumer's self-brand connection, given that consumers likely support brand that are congruent with their self-brand image (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Moreover, strong self-brand connection may lead consumers to develop "committed partnerships" with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Athlete-brand congruence will be also examined in this paper because it plays an important role when consumers forming self-brand connection.

Many scholars agree that athletes have to be credible to meet consumers' future needs (Arai et al., 2014). The eventual goal for athlete

endorsement is increasing sales. Thus, it is important that consumers have favorable attitude toward the brand and increase their purchase intention. According to Lafferty & Goldsmith (1999), attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention are influenced by endorser credibility in advertisements.

Past studies have focused on celebrity credibility and its impact on customer-related outcomes. However, there is limited study on athlete's credibility and how it affects endorsed brand credibility. Erdem et al. (2006) defined brand credibility as "the believability of the product position information contained in a brand, which requires that consumers perceive the brand as having the ability and willingness to deliver continuously what has been promised" (p.35). In athlete endorsement context, understanding how consumers perceive endorsed brand is important in terms of its credibility. Moreover, consumers may seek congruence between athlete and the brand from athlete's on- and off-field attributes.

Prior studies have shown the impact of celebrity endorsement on consumer responses. For example, Lee & Koo (2015) have posited that endorser credibility and endorser-product congruence affect attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. There is, however, limited research on how celebrity endorsement might affect

consumer-based brand equity such as purchase intention. Athletes have unique characteristics that they may have sport related image and non-sport related image. In this study, elements that describe endorser credibility are implemented in athlete brand endorsement perspective. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to assess the impact of athlete brand image on consumer-based brand equity, especially credibility of the endorsed brand.

Self-brand connection can be defined as a strong linkage between a brand and an individual's aspect of self (Escalas, 2004). Escalas (2004) has stated that there are many ways to make a connection between a brand and an individual self-aspect if consumers adopt brand associations to meet self-motivated. In a celebrity endorsement context, it has been observed that SBC partly mediates the relationship between endorser credibility and brand equity (Dwivedi et al., 2005). Thus, the second objective is to examine how self-brand connection may impact on the endorsed brand credibility. This study is beyond the literature on athlete brand endorsement; rather, it expands the extent to which development of self-brand connection affects endorsed brand credibility.

The ultimate goal of athlete endorsement is to increase sales. Thus, it is important to increase brand equity using the 'right' athlete. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the interaction effect of athlete brand

image and consumer's self-brand connection on brand credibility. The current study further provides guidelines for managers and industry practitioners working with athlete endorsers.

1.3. Research Questions

RQ1: How does an athlete brand image (on- and off-field attributes) affect consumer self-brand connection?

RQ2: How does athlete-brand congruence moderate the relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection?

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background

The conceptual framework (See Figure 1) is based on meaning transfer model and balance theory. In this research, meaning transfer model is used to explain the relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection. Balance theory is used to explain the triad relationship between athlete brand image, self-brand connection and brand credibility.
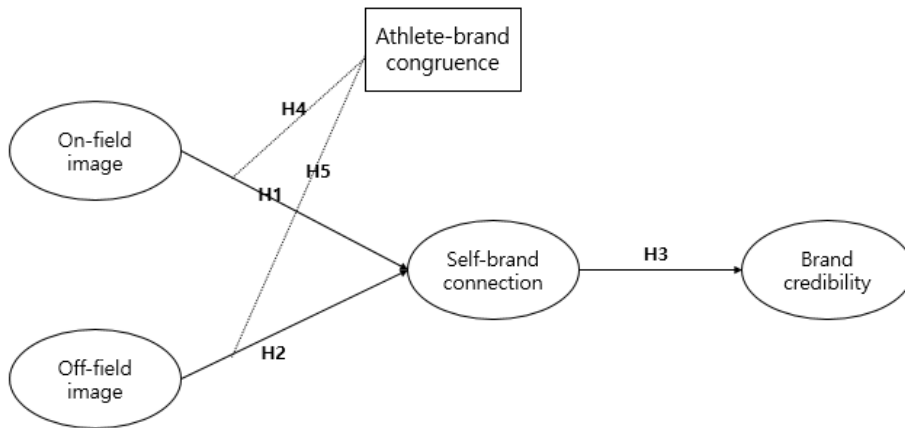
Figure 1. Structural Model

2.1. Meaning transfer model

Jain & Roy (2016) have highlighted the importance of exploration of Meaning Transfer Model. The authors posited that understanding Meaning Transfer Model may be helpful to learn celebrity endorsement in a meaningful manner and effective use of celebrity endorsers.

McCracken (1989) has examined the endorsement process from cultural perspective. He has stated that celebrity endorsement plays an important role in meaning transfer process because "symbolic properties" that celebrities hold move from celebrity to good and from good to consumer. Thus, McCracken (1989) developed a three-stage meaning transfer process. In stage 1, celebrities created meanings from the roles they were given in his/her professional field and personal life (Roy, 2018). It was also highlighted that celebrities "own" their meanings whereas anonymous models merely "borrow" the meanings (McCracken, 1989). In stage 2, the meanings are transferred to the product by celebrity endorsing the product. In this stage, consumers tend to perceive the congruence between the celebrity and the product. Later studies (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Misra & Beatty, 1990) support this finding that celebrity/product congruence have significant effects on brand evaluations. In the final stage, the meanings transferred from the product to the consumer through purchase and consumption activity. Celebrities also play a role in this stage because they have created the self like they did in the first stage (McCracken, 1989).

According to McCracken's meaning transfer model (1989), symbolic properties first reside in the celebrity with the products, and the meanings are transferred from celebrity to consumers. Then, the same

meanings are used to develop the self-concept of consumers, which is self-brand connection. From the athlete brand endorsement perspective, athletes may convey symbolic meanings from their on- and off-field images like celebrities generated meanings from the given roles in the first stage. Subsequently, consumers will find the similarity between the athletes and the brand to develop self-brand connection.

2.2. Balance theory

Balance theory is derived from social psychology and examines interpersonal relations. Heider (1958) defines a balanced state "a harmonious state, one which the entities comprising the situation and the feelings about them fit together without stress" (p.192). The principle of balance theory is that individuals in a triad pursue balance in their interpersonal relationships and among attitudes toward these relationships (Basil & Herr, 2006). Based on the balance theory, Mowen (1980) developed a conceptual model which integrated both the source credibility and congruence studies (Roy et al., 2012). In his model, it is predicted that if the consumer has a positive sentiment toward the celebrity and the celebrity is a good fit with the product, the consumer will have positive feeling toward the product. Likewise, if the consumer has a positive sentiment toward the celebrity and the celebrity is a bad fit with the product, it is

predicted that the consumer will have a negative feeling toward the product (Roy et al., 2012).

In athlete endorsement perspective, the consumer will seek a balanced relationship between the athlete and the brand(product). For example, an imbalance will be created when a consumer has preexisting positive attitude toward a product and a neutral/negative attitude toward an athlete are combined. In that case, the consumer may seek balance by reconsidering the attitude toward an athlete to make it positive, or the consumer may reconsider the attitude toward an athlete and change it to negative (Cornwell et al., 2005). This occurs because consumers desire harmony, and they would find it unstable if positive element is linked to negative element (Dean, 2002).

Crimmins & Horn (1996) used balance theory to explain consumer response to the sponsorship. For example, they have examined the importance of strong link between brand and event by giving example of VISA as a sponsor of 1992 Summer Olympic games. Consumers thought more highly of VISA because the brand was strongly linked to a very well-liked event (Dean, 2002). Crimmins & Horn (1996) stated that the link created between the brand and the event impacted consumer's perception of the brand from positive to more positive. In athlete endorsement context,

consumer's perception of brand credibility will depend on the link between athlete-brand congruence and their perceived image of athlete and brand.

2.3. Literature Review

2.3.1. Athlete brand image

Athlete image management has often been discussed in studies regarding product endorser image rather than a brand itself (Choi & Rifon, 2007; Ohanian, 1991; Till, 2001). However, it is important to consider athletes as brands because they have become cultural, personal, and social idols of their fans (Ilicic and Webster, 2015). A well-branded athletes can enjoy their endorsement period during their sport career and even after their retirement. Hence, it is essential to examine what elements are necessary to build strong athlete brand image. Cortsen (2013) has investigated Annika Sorenstam as a "hybrid personal sports brand" that is built on existing values and characteristics of her. These values and characteristics can be linked with both on- and/or off-field attributes. Previous studies have examined the conceptualization of athlete brand image.

Arai et al. (2014) defined an athlete as "a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market" (p.98). The author further emphasized the importance of brand associations in the

process of building strong brand based on Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model. The model suggests that positive equity is developed when customers have high levels of awareness and familiarity with the brand, and hold strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory.

In the study, Arai et al. (2014) proposed athlete brand image model based on Keller's (1993) classification of attribute dimensions (product related attributes and on-product related attributes). Keller (1993) defined brand image as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993 p.3). In the study, Keller (1993) classified the types of brand association into brand attributes, brand benefits, and brand attitudes. Brand attributes are further classified into product related attributes and non-product related attributes. Product related attributes are necessary elements for performing product or service function whereas non-product related attributes are external elements of product or service, which include price information, packaging or product appearance information, user imagery, and usage imagery (Keller, 1993). In the study, Arai et al. (2014) identified an athlete's brand image as a consumers' perception about athlete brand attributes.

Arai et al. (2014) also adopted Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model and applied it to athlete brand context. In the model,

athletic performance is considered as a product related attribute (on-field attribute) because most of the time athlete's brand status is based on their performance in their sport. Marketable lifestyle is considered as non-product related attributes (off-field attribute). Along with athletic performance and marketable lifestyle, attractive appearance was also included as a dimension because athlete's appearance may serve as a "trademark" of their brands (Arai et al., 2014).

Parmentier & Fisher (2012) examined two elements that characterize athletes' brands: professional image and mainstream media persona. The authors posit that if a brand in general can be thought of as the associations that people make with the goods or services of a particular seller (Keller, 1993), a person brand can be considered to be the set of associations identified with a particular person. Parmentier & Fisher (2012) also added that both professional image and mainstream media personal contribute to an athlete's person brand equity. With the little research on person-brand process, they conducted analysis of case study of two athletes, David Beckham and Ryan Giggs. In the analysis, these two athlete's on-field and off-field brand-building practices illustrated how athletes build brand equity and what factors portray person brands that originate in a professional field.

In the study, Beckham and Giggs were selected because they both were able to develop significant brand equity (Parmentier et al., 2012). Although they share similar careers and both are considered as excellent professional football players, they have "contrasting profiles" as person brands (p 107). Beckham was chosen because his person brand is among the most marketable of any contemporary athlete (Burnwell, 2010; Milligan, 2004; Sweet, 2008). On the other hand, Giggs' person brand has considerably less visibility than Beckham's and thus analysis of his case can provide insight into contrasting brand building practices and outcomes.

According to the author, basic notion of athlete's professional image is "being able to play the game well" (p. 112). On the other hand, attaining media exposure is important to develop a public persona. Beckham and Giggs are relatively comparable in terms of professional image whereas their media persona are not. Parmentier et al. (2012) states that a professional image itself can produce considerable brand equity for an athlete. Moreover, the author further posits that an athlete who has both strong mainstream media personal and a good professional image can develop the higher levels of brand equity than those with a good professional image.

Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) examined the important role of social media as a marketing platform that individual can create a public presentation of themselves. In the study, the author investigates the role of social media as a tool to increase their awareness. It is also stated that social media can be a great tool for athletes to develop their personal brand, especially for those who do not get much mainstream media coverage on a daily basis (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). According to Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, individuals adopt different identities depending on factors such as the audience or setting. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory, Geurin-Eagleman (2016) portrayed athletes' Instagram posts as two different "performances" (Geurin-Eagleman, 2016) : front stage and backstage. Frontstage performances are those that take place in front of others, or an audience, and therefore individuals tend to be more concerned with the impression they create in the minds of others. On the other hand, backstage performances are those that take place when either no audience or a more familiar audience is present (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). It has also stated that there is a strong need for today's athletes to build their brands strategically (Arai et al., 2014) and social media is one of the ways to achieve it.

According to Arai et al. (2014), Parmentier & Fisher (2012), Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016), it has been highlighted that on-field and off-field attributes are key elements to develop athlete brand image. Arai et al. (2014) emphasized understanding athletes as brands by developing athlete brand image model. The author considers athletic performance as on-field attribute, marketable lifestyle as off-field, and appearance as both on-field and off-field attribute.

Parmentier & Fisher examined two elements portraying athletes' brand: professional image and mainstream media persona. As the authors posited, professional image "reflects the perceptions held by insiders to the field" (p.111), which can be described as on-field image. In contrast, athletes need to make themselves known to outsiders to the field to keep a mainstream media persona. In other words, athletes with high public persona, should provide media "an intriguing story" (p.115), which helps to create their off-field image.

Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) categorized Instagram posts into two types: front stage and backstage. In athlete branding context, front stage can be identified as on-field image because athletes are concerned with what others would think about them. Backstage, on the other hand, is identified as

off-field image given that fans are more attracted to athlete's personal life photos than business life photos.

2.3.2. Self-brand connection

Self-brand connection is defined as the strong connection when brand associations are used to construct one's self (Escalas, 2004). Consumers use brands as a tool to construct self-concept, resulting in a "brand as self" conceptualization (Cheng et al., 2012). Rosenberg (1981) refers self-concept to the way consumers think and feel about who, and what, they perceive themselves to be. Moreover, consumers are often involved in a process of defining their self-identities and desired self-images (Escalas, 2004). For example, if a consumer has strong self-brand connection with Nike may view himself as adventurous and challenging leader, connecting his self-concept to Nike's slogan, *just do it.* In other words, he uses Nike to describe his characteristics of the self-concept.

Escalas & Bettman (2003) argued that consumer having a set of brand associations is important component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) because those brand associations are used to construct the self, and eventually form the connection between the brand and the consumer. Bearden & Etzel (1982) defines a reference group as a person or group of people that significantly influences an individual's behavior" (p.184).

Escalas & Bettman (2003) also consider reference group as a source that lead such connection. According to the authors, associations about reference groups become associated with brands, and then connected to consumers' mental representations of self as they find congruence between the brand and themselves, thus forming a connection. In athlete endorsement perspective, the athlete can be part of reference group. Thus, it is assumed that a set of associations about athlete will be connected to the brand, and then to the consumer.

The importance of forming a self-brand connection has been also examined (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Consumers with self-brand connection may have strong brand attitudes that are not vulnerable to change and more generous about the brand. Thus, forming a self-brand connection is important given that consumers create connections with the brands, and it helps with construction of self. By classifying the brand as part of the self, a consumer develops a sense of oneness with the brand, creating cognitive links that connect the brand with the self (Park et al., 2010).

Previous studies have investigated some factors that influence forming self-brand connection. For example, Escalas (2004) argued that consumer's narrative processing is vital component in building connection

between the consumer and the brand. This statement is, however, premised on that consumer form self-brand connection by applying their experiences with brands. When narrative processing occurs, consumers tend to apply self-related stories in their memories so that the constructed narratives or stories make brands meaningful for consumers and creates a link between a brand and a consumer's self-concept. The findings have demonstrated that increased narrative processing enhance SBCs.

On the other hand, Dwivedi et al. (2015) posited that certain brand have "symbolic associations" (p.451) that are crucial for consumer's sensing a self. Such brands develop strong emotional ties with consumer over time, culminating in development of favorable brand attitudes and behavioral intentions (Escalas, 2004). Westhuizen (2018) argued that consumer's brand experience can be a way of verifying the self-brand connection. Both SBC and brand experience are positively associated with brand loyalty, which will eventually increase purchase intention and attitude toward the brand. Similarly, when consumer's personal experience with the brand is closely connected to the brand, stronger self-brand connection may occur (Moore & Homer, 2008). As discussed earlier, consumers use brands to express their self. Thus, self-brand connection becomes meaningful when stronger brand associations are connected to the self (Hammerl et al., 2016).

2.3.3. Brand credibility

The concept of brand credibility is based on Hovland et al.'s (1953) early research on the credibility of the communicator, and was adapted to the context of the brand by Erdem & Swait (1998, 2004), Erdem et al. (2002) and Swait and Erdem (2006). According to Erdem & Swait (2004), brand credibility is defined as "the believability of the product information contained in a brand, which requires that consumers perceive that the brand have the ability and willingness to continuously deliver what has been promised" (p.192). Erdem & Swait (2004) posited that credibility has two main components: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness refers to "the willingness of firms to deliver what they have promised whereas expertise refers to the ability of firms to actually deliver what they have promised" (Baek et al., 2010, p.665). The concept of brand credibility was examined by Erdem & Swait (1998), who analysed consumer-based brand equity by implementing signaling theory.

In marketing perspective, signaling theory has been adopted to show not only firm's signaling to the consumer but also signaling from firm to firm (Erdem & Swait, 1998). According to the theory, which is largely rooted in information economics, firms may use brand as a signal to convey information to consumers. In other words, when consumers are unclear

about the brand and marketplace is structured by asymmetric information, brands can serve as signal of product positions (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Consumers may be uncertain about the brand when enough information is not contained. Thus, it is important that brand conveys credible and reliable information to the consumers. Brand signals contain firm's past and present marketing mix strategies, and this makes brand signals different from other elements like charging higher price or offering warranties (Klein & Leffler, 1981). Therefore, brand can serve as credible market signals when information is imperfect (Erdem & Swait, 1998).

In addition, brand signal contains two components: clarity and credibility. Clarity refers to the absence of ambiguity in the brand association (Erdem & Swait, 1998) whereas credibility refers to how effectively brand signal delivers information. Credibility is considered the most important characteristic of a brand signal. Baek et al. (2010) posited that "consumer may perceive brands as signal of unobservable product quality" (p.664). A credible brand signal is essential because it creates value to consumer. According to Erdem & Swait (1998), brand signal may create consumer's favorable perception about the brand and increase perceived quality. Similarly, brand signal can lower consumer's information gathering, processing costs and perceived risk (Baek et al., 2010).

Prior research on brand equity has examined the consumer's brand association. Several researchers have used the term consumer-based brand equity when conceptualizing the brand equity. Mackay et al. (1997) referred consumer based brand equity as the added value of the brand of the consumer (p.1153). In other words, if this value is applied to consumer, it can be referred as consumer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) conceptualized brand equity differently, but both agreed that brand equity in consumer perspective is based on consumers' memory-based brand associations (Pappu et al., 2005).

For example, Aaker (1991) stated that brand equity is consisted of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other assets (p.16). Aaker also suggests that brand equity may provide value to both customer and the firm. Aaker (1991) argues that brand equity brings value to the customer helping them processing information about the brand. They also can affect customers' purchase decision with past-experience of the brand. More importantly, perceived quality and brand associations may increase customers' satisfaction with the brand. Moreover, brand equity provide value to the firms in various ways such as attracting new customers with effective marketing program, enhancing brand loyalty to increase purchase intention, and expanding brand extension.

On the other hand, Keller (1993) conceptualized brand equity from customer perspective and defined it as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p.2). According to Keller (1993), brand knowledge is consisted of two components, brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness refers to the strength of consumer's ability to identify the brand whereas brand image is defined as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (p.3). Keller (1993) states that understanding the structure of brand knowledge is significant because customer-based equity occurs when consumer is familiar with brand and holds positive brand associations.

According to signaling theory, credibility can build brand equity. As discussed earlier, consumer-based brand equity refers to added value of a brand to a consumer. Applying this to athlete endorsement perspective, consumers may attain added benefits such as enhanced self-esteem, social approval, and expression of individuality when self-brand connection is developed (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In this study, brand credibility is examined because eventual goal for athlete endorsement is to increase sales. To achieve that goal, consumers should attain favorable attitude toward the brand that is perceived to be credible. It is assumed that higher brand

credibility can increase consumer's perception of brand by psychophysical process, so their objective levels are transferred to perceived levels (Erdem et al., 2002).

2.4. Hypotheses development

2.4.1. Athlete brand image and self-brand connection

Many researchers have agreed that athlete's on and off-field attributes may construct athlete brand image (Arai, 2014; Parmentier & Fisher, 2012; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Most athlete's brand image can be constructed by his/her on-field performance, but it is also largely driven by his/her off-field performance. For example, Tiger Woods' image of excellent golfer can be damaged by his scandal and moral issues, which are off-field. On the other hand, self-brand connection goes deeper than athlete brand image, which consumers may form via athlete's on and off-field attributes. The direct relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection can be explained using the associative network memory model.

2.4.1.1. Associative network memory model

Keller(1993) states that it is important to understand how consumer's brand knowledge is structured in their mind because they influence consumer's judgement about a brand. According to associative

network memory model, consumer knowledge of brand is stored as a set of nodes and links in memory (Keller, 1993). These nodes are interconnected by links, referred to as associations (Dwivedi et al., 2015). These associations vary in strength and determine the extent of information that is regained from memory (Keller, 1993).

In an athlete brand endorsement, an "athlete" and a "brand" each represent a set of information nodes and associations in consumer memory (Till, 1998). Therefore, the brand and endorser become part of each other's association set when paired repeatedly (Till & Busler, 2000). For example, Nike's consistent use of Michael Jordan as endorser results in consumers thinking of Michael Jordan when thinking of Nike, and, consumers thinking of Nike when thinking of Michael Jordan. Nike and Jordan have become part of each other's association set (Till, 1998).

Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model was based on the associative network memory model, premising that consumers' various decision making largely depends on their knowledge of the brand and the thoughts they link with the brand (Kunkel et al., 2020). In athlete branding context, this brand knowledge would be consumer's perceived knowledge of athlete and his/her brand image (Kunkel et al., 2020). Based on the preceding discussion, self-brand connection is developed when brand

associations are used to construct one's self. Once the self is constructed, the connection between the brand and consumer is formed. Thus, consumer's knowledge of athlete brand image plays an important role in forming self-brand connection. In this study, brand knowledge is defined as the process of consumer's learning about athlete brand image via athletes' on and off-field attributes. Therefore, the following hypothesis are postulated:

Hypothesis 1: Athlete's on-field images are positively associated with the self-brand connection.

Hypothesis 2 Athlete's off-field images are positively associated with the self-brand connection.

2.4.2. Self-brand connection and brand credibility

Credibility and perceived value in brand are two important components marketers need to consider to build a strong brand (Vanrenen, 2005). Brand credibility, defined as the perceived believability of whether a brand has the ability and willingness to continuously deliver what has been promised (Erdem & Swait, 2004), is important because it is beneficial to both consumers and companies (Baek et al., 2010). For example, when consumers buy credible products, the quality of the product is assured. Also, when consumer is uncertain about the brand information, the brand

credibility may play an important role with the consideration. For companies, credible brands may bring them sale increase through consumer's repeated purchase.

As previously discussed, self-brand connection is defined as a strong connection when brand associations are used to construct one's self. This connection is formed based on consumer's brand knowledge. According to Dwivedi et al. (2015), "self-brand connection likely develops as the idealized image of a celebrity is linked to the brand through the endorsement process" (p.452). Additionally, consumers attain benefits through self-brand connection which may positively relate to brand-related outcomes. In athlete endorsement context, on- and off-field image of an athlete may deliver symbolic meaning to consumers, who will likely identify those meanings to form a self-brand connection (Kunkel et al., 2020).

Consumers construct 'self' based on their perceived brand knowledge. In other words, the relationship between brand and consumer has developed. Prior research has suggested that self-brand connection positively affects brand-related outcomes such as purchase intention, brand loyalty, and brand evaluation. For example, Westhuizen (2018) argues that consumer with SBC may be positively associated with brand loyalty,

providing value to the brand through increased purchase. Dwivedi et al. (2014) states that development of SBC is expected to be positively related to brand evaluation.

According to Sweeney & Swait (2008), brand credibility represents the summary of brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand communication over time because brand and consumer develop relationship each other. Hence, it can be predicted that stronger SBC may be positively associated with higher brand credibility. Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is advanced.

Hypothesis 3: Consumer's self-brand connection is positively associated with brand credibility.

2.4.3. Moderating role of athlete-brand congruence

Some studies posit that using celebrities as endorsers can be an effective strategy to attain consumer attention (Atkin & Block, 1983), enhance message recall (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), increase believability of the ads (Kamins, Brand, Hoeke, & Moe, 1989), and create positive word of mouth communications (Bush et al., 2004). However, using celebrities might not be always effective for all brands in all situations (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). For example, celebrities might be ineffective when there is negative media about the celebrity that damages not only their

image but also the image of the endorsed brand. Also, the type of product may influence the effectiveness of the specific celebrity (Kamins, 1990; Solomon, 2007). For example, Tiger Woods has been effective as Nike endorser; however, Tiger Woods in Buick's ads was ineffective in increasing sale or increasing the average age of their buyers. Thus, it is important for a firm to use the right celebrity for the right brand. In the case of athletes, this is particularly true because they are recognized from their sport but their personal behavior is examined by media (Koernig & Boyd, 2009).

According to Fiske's (1982) two-category model, judgments about the endorser and brand are influenced by the endorser-brand match. Then, how do we know if endorser and brand are matched? Misra & Beatty (1990) posited that the congruence or incongruence between a brand and spokesperson can be determined by the degree of perceived fit between the brand's image and the endorser's image.

The fit between the celebrity and the product was captured by the term "match-up hypothesis" (Khale & Homer 1985; Kamins 1990). The match-up hypothesis provides a framework that links the relationship between endorser-brand fit and how the image of a spokesperson may affect consumer's brand evaluations. According to the match-up hypothesis, consumer will not have favorable attitude toward endorser unless the image

of the endorser "matches up" with the image of the brand (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Parekh & Kanekar, 1994). For example, when advertising fragrance, it will be more effective to use attractive endorser than unattractive endorser because fragrance is related to beauty, which is consistent with the image of attractive endorser.

Much of early match-up research focused on physical characteristics of the endorser, especially on their physical attractiveness. For example, Kahle & Homer (1985) examined that attractive celebrity brings more favorable attitude toward the endorsed brand than unattractive celebrity. However, they did not demonstrate that attractive celebrity is less effective when endorsing product not enhancing one's attractiveness (Kahle & Homer, 1985). On the other hand, Kamins (1990) expanded Kahle & Homer's (1985) study and examined the relationship between celebrity attractiveness and product type. The study found that the advertisement with attractiveness-related product and physically-attractive celebrity significantly enhanced celebrity's credibility and attitude toward the advertisement (Kamins, 1990).

Ohanian (1991) investigated celebrity endorser source characteristics – physical attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise – and verified that expertise was most closely associated with intent to purchase

3 3

the endorsed product. According to Till & Busler (2000), belongingness, relatedness, fit and similarity are important factors that are easily established between associative connection and the endorser. While using fictitious model, Till & Busler (2000) examined the role of physical attractiveness in affecting attitude toward the endorsed brand and the role of expertise in enhancing the perceived fit between the product and the endorser. They found that expertise was a better match-up factor than physical attractiveness. Additionally, Koernig & Boyd (2009) examined the roles of product-endorser "fit" with celebrity and non-celebrity endorsers by comparing the effects of a famous athlete and an unknown model on a variety of consumer responses. They found that matching the athlete with sport-related or sport-unrelated brand did not make any difference on evaluation on the brand. Instead, it only increased liking and trust of the endorser.

Consumer's knowledge about the brand plays an important role when forming self-brand connection because SBC is developed based on consumer's brand knowledge. The fit or congruence between an endorser and the brand being endorsed helps consumer when developing brand knowledge. Choi & Rifon (2012) highlights that an endorser should be matched with the product for an endorsement to be effective. Match-up or

athlete endorser-brand congruence indicates that "the highly relevant characteristics of the endorser are consistent with the highly relevant attributes of the brand" (Misra & Beatty, 1990). Based on the discussion, the following hypotheses are advanced.

Hypothesis 4: Athlete-brand congruence positively moderates the effect of athlete's on-field attributes to self-brand connection.

Hypothesis 5: Athlete-brand congruence positively moderates the effect of athlete's off-field attributes to self-brand connection.

Chapter 3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 340 participants were recruited from an online research panel of Macromill Embrain, one of the largest professional research companies in South Korea. Those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to indicate their interest in sport on a 5-point Likert-type scale, and only those who rated 3 or above were included in this study. After data cleaning, 21 responses were eliminated because they either marked the same answer for every question, provided inconsistent combinations, failed the attention check. Subsequently, a total of 319 respondents were included in the data analysis.

3.2. Pretest

Before the main survey, a pilot test was conducted with 62 participants to identify the combination of an athlete and endorsed brand. The participants were given an athlete endorser and the list of athlete's endorsed brands. A systematic procedure was taken to decide an athlete endorser. Our research team decided that the chosen athlete endorser must meet three criteria.

First, the athlete must be highly noticeable to the respondent group so that they can provide more accurate responses to questions in the survey.

Second, the athlete should have endorsed enough brands. The idea was to ensure the list of endorsed brands can be generated so that the respondents may have a broader option. Third, the selected athlete endorser must be relevant to both male and female consumers to ensure adequate survey participation.

Son Heung-min was chosen as an athlete endorser in our study. He has been declared The Best Footballer in Asia for the sixth time (Titan Sports, 2021) and he has recently signed with CAA Sport, which gives sports stars the chance to become a big star worldwide. Since the participants were Korean, choosing Korean athlete was more reasonable. Lastly, football is one of the most common sports in Korea, it is relevant to both male and female. Thus, we have concluded that Son Heung-min would meet those three criteria.

Eleven brands that Son Heung-min has endorsed from 2018 to 2021 were chosen to generate the list. Those include Adidas, TAG Heuer, KEB Hana Bank, Gillette, TS Shampoo, Shinramyeon (Korean spicy noodle), Supercon ice cream, SK Telecom, Volvo, Powerade, and Antiphlamine (pain relief lotion). Participants were asked to choose the brand from the list that they think the most congruent with the athlete. Then, they were asked to

choose the brand from the same list that they think the least congruent with the athlete.

The result revealed that 45 per cent (n=28) of the respondents chose Adidas as the most congruent brand with Son Heng-min. On the other hand, 31 per cent (n=19) of the respondent chose Supercon (ice cream) as the least congruent brand with Son Heung-min. Thus, two sets of survey were developed and randomly distributed to the 340 participants. The questionnaire contained items measuring athlete brand image, consumer self-brand connection, athlete-brand congruence, and brand credibility.

3.3. Measures and measurement

These measurement scale have been adapted from the existing literature (Arai et al., 2013; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Erdam & Swait, 2004). Athlete brand image is a higher-order construct consisting of two sub-dimensions, on-field image and off-field image. Athlete on- and off-field images are considered key elements to develop athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014; Parmentier and Fisher, 2012; Guerin-Eagleman, 2016). To measure athlete's on- and off-field attributes, a list of items influencing athlete brand image was developed based on Arai et al. (2013, 2014). Thus, athlete on-field image is measured with five items whereas off-field image is measured with four items. Athlete brand image is

measured using 9-item scale on a 7-point Likert scale items, from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Consumer self-brand connection is measured using four items derived from Escalas & Bettman (2003) and Dwivedi et al. (2015). Self-brand connection is measured on a 7-point Likert scale items, from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Brand credibility is composed of two main elements, expertise and trustworthiness (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Consumers consider a brand "credible" when the brand have ability and willingness to deliver what has been promised (Erdem & Swait, 2004, p. 192). Four items encompassing expertise and trustworthiness are used for measuring brand credibility on a 7-point Likert scale.

Finally, athlete-brand congruence is included as the covariate. According to match-up hypothesis (Khale & Homer 1985; Kamins 1990), consumer will have favorable attitude toward the endorser if the image of the endorser "matches up" with the endorsed brand. Thus, athlete-brand congruence may affect the consumer when for ming self-brand connection. Athlete-brand congruence is measured using 3-item scale on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.4. Procedure

The statistical process of survey in this study was analysed using SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 25.0, a structural equation model (SEM) program. First, descriptive analysis was performed to analyse the general characteristics of the sample. Second, reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were performed to test the reliability and validity of the measurement variable. Third, structural equation model (SEM) was analysed to evaluate the suitability of the proposed research model and to test the relationship between variables. Finally, multi-group analysis was performed to verify the effectiveness of the moderating variables.

Chapter 4. Results

4.1. Research design

The respondents were between 20 and 69 years (M=39; SD=12.11) and majority of the sample was male (50.2%). The questionnaire included questions related to the athlete brand image (on-field and off-field attributes), athlete-brand congruence, self-brand connection and the credibility of the endorsed brand. Two sets of survey with two brands (Adidas and Supercon) were randomly given to the respondents. Thus, 159 participants had Adidas-related questions whereas 160 had Supercon-related questions.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristic

Variable	Group	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	160	50.2
	Female	159	49.8
Age	20-29	80	25.1
	30-39	80	25.1
	40-49	79	24.8
	50+	80	25.1
Brand	Adidas	159	49.8
	Supercon	160	50.2
Education	High school	73	22.9
	University	212	66.5
	Graduate school	31	0.7
	Others	3	0.9

Table 1-1. Descriptive Statistics

	Average	S.D.
On-field 1	5.88	1.150
On-field 2	6.28	1.047
On-field 3	5.75	1.124
On-field 4	6.14	.969
On-field 5	6.00	1.097
Off-field 1	5.67	1.183
Off-field 2	5.44	1.190
Off-field 3	5.87	1.124
Off-field 4	6.09	1.047
SBC1	5.11	1.305
SBC2	4.95	1.265
SBC3	4.75	1.394
SBC4	4.69	1.423
Brand credibility 1	5.01	1.163
Brand credibility 2	4.95	1.179
Brand credibility 3	5.16	1.173
Brand credibility 4	5.16	1.201

4.2. Model Analysis

4.2.1. Reliability analysis

To assess the reliability of the measurement, reliability analysis was conducted. In general, when the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.7 or higher, it is determined that the measurement is reliable (Fornwell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's alpha (α) test generated values of .90 to .95 for

all measurement items (see Table 2). These values indicated acceptable internal reliability based on the standard (.70).

Table 2. Result of reliability analysis

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's α
On-field	5	0.91
Off-field	4	0.90
Self-brand connection	4	0.91
Brand Credibility	4	0.95

4.2.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to test the validity of measurement items. CFA can give the investigator valuable information regarding the fit of the data to the specific, theory-derived measurement model (where items load only on the factors they were designed to measure), and point to the potential weakness of specific items (Hancock, 2001).

In this study, in order to generate high suitability of the measurement model, the process of removing items that do not meet the factor loading and statistical significance criteria of each item was repeatedly performed. Thus, on-field2, off-field1, SBC (self-brand connection) 4, SBC5, SBC6, BC (brand credibility)3, and BC5 were removed. The results (Table 3) revealed that the proposed model provided a

good fit to the data (x^2 = 333.10, $p <$ .01; IFI = .95; TLI = .94; CFI = .95;

RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .05).

Table 3. Model fit

Chi-square(χ^2)	df	x^2/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
333.10	113	2.9	.94	.95	.08	.05

4.2.3. Validity Analysis

     As shown in Table 4, convergent validity is supported as all

standardized factor loadings are above .5. Further, the AVE estimate for all

constructs was greater than .50 (Fornwell and Larcker, 1981). Lastly, the

constructs of the study demonstrated acceptable reliability levels as the

composite reliability estimates exceeded .70. Next, the squared correlation

test of discriminant validity was conducted. We observed support for

discriminant validity as the square-root of AVE (reported in Table 5) for any

given construct is greater than the standardized correlation coefficient of

that construct with all other constructs (Fornell and Larker, 1981).

Table 4. Measurement model

Factors and Items	Factor loading	α	AVE	CR
On-field attributes				
Athlete X shows fair play on the field	0.77	0.93	0.66	0.92
Athlete X has won important titles	0.81			
Athlete X's style is distinctive from that of other plays	0.8			
Athlete X is an impactful player on the field	0.88			
Athlete X has superior skills	0.87			
Off-field attributes				
Athlete X has an interesting personal life	0.83	0.88	0.53	0.85
Athlete X has a unique personality	0.83			
Athlete X has a positive attitude toward fans, media	0.91			
Athlete X is socially responsible	0.78			
Self-brand connection	0.78	0.94	0.53	0.89
I can identify with Brand X	0.87			
Brand X suits me well	0.85			
I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people	0.74			
Brand X is a part of myself	0.81			
Brand credibility				
Brand X has the ability to deliver what it promises	0.89	0.96	0.75	0.95
Brand X delivers what it promises	0.90			
Brand X doesn't pretend to be something it isn't	0.92			
Brand X has a name you can trust.	0.92			

Table 5. Correlation Matrix, AVE, and Squared Correlations

Variables	Correlation			AVE	C.R.
	1	2	3		
On-field(p^2)	1			.93	.94
Off-field(p^2)	.81(.66)	1		.9	.86
Self-brand connection(p^2)	.48(.23)	.46(.21)	1	.91	.89
Brand Credibility(p^2)	.55(.30)	.62(.39)	.77(.59)	.95	.95

4.3. Structural model analysis

4.3.1. Structural Equation Model analysis

The results of the structural model are pictorially presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Summary of the structural model
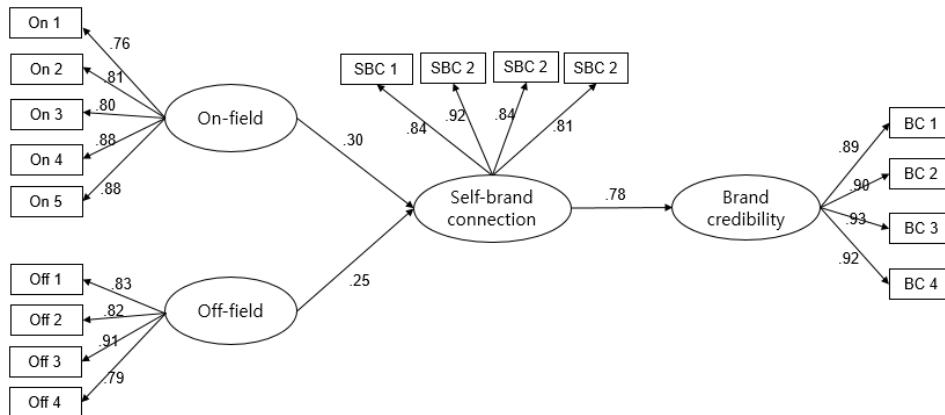
First, I examined the hypothesized direct paths and the structural

model was acceptable fit to data (Table 6). Additionally, each of the

hypothesized path was significant. Athlete's on-field had a direct impact on

self-brand connection ($\beta = .41$, t = 2.84, p < .01). Hence H1 is supported.

Athlete's off-field also had a significant impact on self-brand connection (β = .35, t = 2.37, p < .02), supporting *H2*. Lastly, self-brand connection had a direct impact on brand credibility ($\beta = .70$, t = 14.02, p < .01), supporting *H3*.

Table 6. Model fit

Chi-square($\chi 2$)	*df*	x²/*df*	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
818.59	244	3.34	.91	.92	.09	.08

Table 7. Structural model results

Hypothesized Effects	β	t	*p*
On-field → Self-brand connection	.41	2.84	.01
Off-field → Self-brand connection	.35	2.37	.02
Self-brand connection → Brand Credibility	.70	14.02	***

4.3.2. Moderating role of athlete-brand congruence

I examined the hypotheses pertaining to moderation using multi-groups analysis (MGSEM). Multi-group structural equation models test separate structural models in two or more groups (Jöreskog, 1971; Sorböm, 1974). First, the overall fit of the model (Table 8) was examined and it was acceptable fit to data: x² = 544.28, x²/df = 2.37, TLI = .93, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06 Then, measurement invariance was examined to verify that

the estimated factors are measuring the same underlying latent construct within each group. Measurement equivalence/invariance (ME/I; Vandenberg, 2002) can be thought of as operations yielding measures of the same attribute under different conditions (Horn & McArdle, 1992). Table 9 shows that the measurement invariance is not satisfied (p > .05).

Table 8. Model fit

Chi-square(χ 2)	df	x²/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
544.28	230	2.37	.93	.94	.06	.08

Table 9. Measurement invariance

Model	df	Chi-square(χ 2)	p
Measurement weights	13	21.63	.06

Lastly, critical ratios difference was examined to see the difference between two sets of moderator (Table 10). *H4* predicted that athlete-brand congruence positively moderates the effect of athlete's on-field attributes to self-brand connection. The relationship between on-field attributes and self-brand connection was slightly stronger for the low athlete-brand congruence (β = .60; p < .05) than for the high athlete-brand congruence (β = .34; p < .05). However, these differences were not statistically significant (CRD = .94). Thus, *H4* was not supported.

H5 predicted that athlete-brand congruence positively moderates the effect of athlete's off-field attributes to self-brand connection. The result revealed that the relationship between off-field attributes and self-brand connection was slightly stronger for the high athlete-brand congruence (β = .38; p <.05) than for the low athlete-brand congruence (β = .11; p < .05). However, these differences were not statistically significant (CRD = -.97). Thus, *H5* was not supported.

Table 10. Critical Ratios Difference

	Adidas (high congruence)			Supercon (low congruence)			
	β	*p*	C.R.	β	*p*	C.R.	CRD
On-field -> SBC	0.34	0.02	2.27	0.60	0.01	2.54	0.94
Off-field -> SBC	0.38	0.02	2.34	0.11	0.62	0.50	-0.97

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of athlete brand image (on- and off-field) and its impact on brand credibility. Millions of dollars are spent to use celebrities for endorsing products because it is an effective strategy to gain and hold consumer attention, enhance message recall, and create positive word of mouth communications. However, it may not be effective at times, raising questions on their roles as endorsers. Thus, it is important for a firm to understand when using a celebrity for endorsing certain brands. Moreover, this research contributes to the athlete endorsement literature by integrating meaning transfer and balance theory, allowing branding managers to better understand the function of athlete endorsers.

First, *H1* predicted a positive relationship between athlete's on-field image and self-brand connection. *H2* predicted a positive relationship between athlete's off-field image and self-brand connection. Our findings indicate that athlete brand image has a significant impact on consumer self-brand connection, supporting the use of athlete endorsers for brand building. The result supports Keller's (1993) associative network memory model. When consumer sees the athlete endorsing brand, the athlete and the brand

each represent a set of information nodes and associations in consumer memory (Till, 1998). Further, it also supports McCracken's (1998) meaning transfer model that the valued meaning can be moved from celebrity to the product. When consumers see the similarity between celebrity and the product, it then moves into their lives to construct self with favourable brand associations. Once the self is constructed, the connection between the brand and consumer is formed. Thus, consumer's perceived knowledge of the athlete brand image is critical in forming self-brand connection. This finding was consistent with prior study (Kunkel et al., 2020) that the athlete's on-field image is positively associated with self-brand connection. In the prior study, however, the relationship between off-field image and self-brand connection was not supported.

H3 predicted a positive relationship between self-brand connection and brand credibility. This is consistent with prior study (Westhuizen, 2018), suggesting that consumer with self-brand connection is positively associated with brand loyalty, providing value to the brand through increased purchase. From a theoretical perspective, the effect of self-brand connection is consistent with Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model. It was based on the associative network memory model, premising that consumers' various decision making largely depends on their knowledge of the brand

and the thoughts they link with the brand (Kunkel et al., 2020). The result of this study indicates the significant impact of self-brand connection on endorsed brand credibility. Pappu et al (2005) provided four dimensions of consumer-based brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. According to Erdem & Swait (1998), brand signalling theory highlights the role of credibility as the key factors of consumer-based brand equity. Thus, this study supports prior study (Dwivedi et al., 2015) that self-brand connection has a direct significant impact on brand equity, which is brand credibility in this study.

H4 predicted that athlete-brand congruence would positively moderate the effect of athlete's on-field image on self-brand connection. *H5* predicted that athlete-brand congruence would positively moderate the effect of athlete's off-field image on self-brand connection; these relationships were not supported. Moreover, the results were inconsistent with prior study (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Parekh & Kanekar, 1994) that endorsers are more effective when there is a "fit" between endorser and the endorsed product because there was no difference in the level of "fit" between athlete and the endorsed brand.

The result suggests that the impact of athlete endorser was positively associated regardless of the different levels of athlete-brand

congruence. This finding is a valuable contribution to our understanding of athlete endorsement, self-brand connection, and brand credibility. The past studies (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Misra & Beatty, 1990) have examined that an endorser should be matched with the product to be effective, indicating highly relevant characteristics of the endorser are consistent with highly relevant brand attributes. This study showed empirical evidence supporting the effect of athlete-brand congruence on developing self-brand connection, consistent with prior research (Misra & Beatty, 1990; Till & Busler, 2000).

5.2. Limitation and future research

This study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the use of panel data from professional research company would not represent the whole population in South Korea. Future research should aim to expand the scope of sample data.

Second, there might be a possibility that respondent would not recognize the difference between two brands: Adidas and Supercon because they both are already endorsed by Son Heung-min. Despite of conducting pretest and expert review, respondent might already have favourable attitude toward the athlete because he is well-known, likable athlete in South Korea. Future research may use athletes who have both positive and negative

on/off-field images to examine the impact of negative athlete brand image on brand credibility.

Finally, the present study relies on a sample of Korean consumers. The list of endorsed brands for the pretest was mix of American brands and Korean brands. Future research can be utilized with other product categories, brands and celebrities to increase the generalisability of the results.

5.3. Conclusion

Many firms and brands have used athlete as their endorsers to draw more attention. Especially athletes have become popular endorsers since consumers may develop their brand images from on-field and off-field. The current study extends the previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on- and off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image and its effects on associated brands.

Overall, the results of this study add to our understanding of how consumers incorporate brands into their self-concept and how this, in turn, impacts endorsed brand credibility. It is critical that athletes have both athletic performance and public personas to become a strong brand (Walsh & Williams, 2017). The result of this study has shown that the athlete-brand congruence was not an important factor on the relationship between athlete brand image and self-brand connection. Instead, regardless of athlete-brand

congruence level, the effect of athlete endorser was positively associated

with brand credibility.

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        extensions. Journal of Sport Management, 31(1), 44–60. doi:10.
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Appendix I. Measures used in the main study

Constructs	Items	Source
Athlete brand image (on-field)	Athlete X shows fair play on the field	Arai et al. (2003, 2004)
	Athlete X has won important titles	
	Athlete X's style is distinctive from that of other plays	
	Athlete X is an impactful player on the field	
	Athlete X has superior skills	
Athlete brand image (off-field)	Athlete X has an interesting personal life	
	Athlete X has a unique personality	
	Athlete X has a positive attitude toward fans, media	
	Athlete X is socially responsible	
Self-brand connection	I can identify with Brand X	
	Brand X suits me well	
	I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people	Erdem & Swait (2000)
	Brand X is a part of myself	
Brand credibility	Brand X has the ability to deliver what it promises	
	Brand X delivers what it promises	Escalas & Bettman(2003) Dwivedi et al. (2015)
	Brand X doesn't pretend to be something it isn't	
	Brand X has a name you can trust.	
Athlete-brand congruence	Athlete X is a good fit with Brand Y.	Keller & Aaker (1992) Gwinner & Bennet (2008)
	Athlete X endorsing Brand Y is very logical.	
	Athlete X endorsing Brand Y is very appropriate	
	Athlete X and brand Y have many similarities.	

Appendix II. Survey Questions

브랜드 이미지 및 신뢰도에 미치는 영향

SQ1. 귀하의 성별은 어떻게 되십니까?

    1. 남자

    2. 여자

SQ2. 귀하의 나이는 어디에 해당합니까?

    1. 19 세 이하

    2. 20~29 세

    3. 30~39 세

    4. 40~49 세

    5. 50 세 이상

SQ3. 귀하께서는 평소 스포츠에 어느 정도 관심이 있으십니까?

전혀 관심이 없다	별로 관심이 없는 편이다	보통이다	관심이 있는 편이다	매우 관심이 있다
1	2	3	4	5

A 그룹 150 명 (손흥민/아디다스)

아래 내용을 잘 읽어봐 주시기 바랍니다.

아디다스 (Adidas)

아디다스(Adidas)는 독일의 스포츠 용품 브랜드이다. 특유의 3 선 트레이드 마크로 유명하다. 유럽 최대의 스포츠웨어 제조업체이며, 나이키 다음으로 세계에서 두번째로 큰 스포츠웨어 제조 기업이다. 운동화를 비롯해 의류나 액세서리 등 다양한 제품을 판매한다. 손흥민은 2008 년 아디다스 코리아와 후원 계약 후 아디다스 글로벌 본사와 2023 년까지 15 년 계약을 맺었다.

Q1. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	---	---	보통 이다	---	---	매우 그렇다
1. 페어플레이: 손흥민은 페어플레이를 하는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 노력: 손흥민은 매 경기에서 최선을 다한다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 성과: 손흥민은 축구선수로서 눈부신 성취를 하였다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 경기스타일: 손흥민의 경기 스타일은 다른 선수들과는 차별화된다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 영향력: 손흥민은 필드에서 영향력 있는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 스킬: 손흥민은 뛰어난 스킬을 가지고 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	―――	―――	보통이다	―――	―――	매우 그렇다
1. 신체적 매력: 손흥민은 외모가 준수하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 라이프스토리: 손흥민의 인생 스토리를 보면 축구에 대한 그의 열정과 진심을 볼 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 성격: 손흥민은 도덕적이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 태도: 손흥민은 팬과 매체에게 긍정적인 태도를 보여준다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 영향력: 손흥민은 사회적으로 영향력이 있는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	―――	―――	보통이다	―――	―――	매우 그렇다
1. 손흥민과 아디다스는 알맞은 조합이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 손흥민이 아디다스를 홍보하는 것은 합리적이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 손흥민이 아디다스를 홍보하는 것은 적절하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 손흥민과 아디다스는 서로 관련이 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 손흥민과 아디다스의 조합은 잘 어울린다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	---	---	보통 이다	---	---	매우 그렇다
1. 아디다스 제품을 입은 내 모습을 쉽게 상상할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 아디다스 제품은 나에게 잘 어울린다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 아디다스를 통해 나의 취향을 보여줄 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 아디다스 브랜드는 내게 친숙하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 아디다스 제품을 사용하면 내가 원하는 모습에 가까워 지는 것 같다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 아디다스 브랜드에 애정을 갖고 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. '나' 라는 사람을 설명할 때 아디다스 제품을 착용한 내 모습을 떠올릴 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	---	---	보통 이다	---	---	매우 그렇다
1. 아디다스가 제공하는 정보를 신뢰할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 아디다스는 고객에게 약속한 서비스를 제공한다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 아디다스의 서비스 불만처리는 믿음이 간다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. 아디다스 제품에 대해 신뢰할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 아디다스는 믿을 만하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 아디다스를 이용해온 경험으로, 나는 아디다스가 소비자에게 좋은 품질의 제품을 제공할 것이라는 믿음이 생겼다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

B 그룹 150 명 (손흥민/빙그레 슈퍼콘 아이스크림)

아래 내용을 잘 읽어봐 주시기 바랍니다.

> **빙그레 슈퍼콘 아이스크림**
>
> 2018 년 4 월, 빙그레에서 출시한 콘 아이스크림이다. 공격적인 광고 모델 기용,
> 기성품들과 다른 바삭한 콘에 대한 호평에 힘입어 빠른 속도로 인기를 모으면서
> 2019 년 2 월까지 누적매출 115 억 원을 달성했다. 2019 년 4 월부터는
> 손흥민을 모델로 광고를 제작하였으며 해당 광고는 해외에서도 큰 화제가
> 되었다.

Q1. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇 지 않 다	− − −	− − −	보통 이다	− − −	− − −	매우 그렇 다
1. 페어플레이: 손흥민은 페어플레이를 하는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 노력: 손흥민은 매 경기 에서 최선을 다한다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 성과: 손흥민은 축구선수 로서 눈부신 성취를 하였 다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 경기스타일: 손흥민의 경 기 스타일은 다른 선수들과 는 차별화된다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 영향력: 손흥민은 필드에 서 영향력 있는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 스킬: 손흥민은 뛰어난 스킬을 가지고 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	───	───	보통이다	───	───	매우 그렇다
1. 신체적 매력: 손흥민은 외모가 준수하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 라이프스토리: 손흥민의 인생 스토리를 보면 축구에 대한 그의 열정과 진심을 볼 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 성격: 손흥민은 도덕적이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 태도: 손흥민은 팬과 매체에게 긍정적인 태도를 보여준다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 영향력: 손흥민은 사회적으로 영향력이 있는 선수이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	───	───	보통이다	───	───	매우 그렇다
1. 손흥민과 슈퍼콘은 알맞은 조합이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 손흥민이 슈퍼콘을 홍보하는 것은 합리적이다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 손흥민이 슈퍼콘을 홍보하는 것은 적절하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 손흥민과 슈퍼콘은 서로 관련이 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 손흥민과 슈퍼콘의 조합은 잘 어울린다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	---	---	보통 이다	---	---	매우 그렇다
1. 슈퍼콘을 먹는 내 모습을 쉽게 상상할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 슈퍼콘 제품은 나에게 잘 어울린다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. 슈퍼콘을 통해 나의 취향을 보여줄 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 슈퍼콘 제품은 내게 친숙하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 슈퍼콘을 먹으면 내가 원하는 모습에 가까워 지는 것 같다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 슈퍼콘 제품에 애정을 갖고 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. '나' 라는 사람을 설명할 때 슈퍼콘을 먹는 내 모습을 떠올릴 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5. 아래 내용에 얼마나 동의하시는지 7 점 만점으로 응답해 주시기 바랍니다.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	---	---	보통 이다	---	---	매우 그렇다
1. 슈퍼콘이 제공하는 정보를 신뢰할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. 슈퍼콘은 고객에게 약속한 서비스를 제공한다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

3. 슈퍼콘의 서비스 불만처리는 믿음이 간다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. 슈퍼콘 제품에 대해 신뢰할 수 있다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. 슈퍼콘은 믿을 만하다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. 슈퍼콘을 이용해온 경험으로, 나는 슈퍼콘이 소비자에게 좋은 품질의 제품을 제공할 것이라는 믿음이 생겼다.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

국문초록

선수 브랜드 이미지가 브랜드 신뢰성에
미치는 영향에 대한 연구

마　　상　　희

글로벌스포츠매니지먼트 전공

체육교육과

서울대학교 대학원

　　매년 많은 기업과 브랜드에서는 거액을 들여 운동선수를 후원하고
있다. 이는 후원을 통해 브랜드의 신뢰도를 높이고 소비자의 제품과
서비스의 구매로 이어지는 데에 영향을 미치기 때문일 것이다. 본 연구는
선수 브랜드 이미지가 어떻게 소비자들의 자아브랜드 연결을 형성시키고
결국 브랜드 신뢰도까지 영향을 미치는지를 파악하는 데에 있다. 또한,
선수−브랜드 일치성 정도에 따라 자아브랜드 연결 형성에 어떤 영향을
미치는지 밝히고, 추후 선수 후원을 함에 있어 어떤 점이 고려되어야
하는지 전략 수립 기초자료를 제공하는데 목적이 있다.

이러한 연구 목적을 달성하기 위하여 본 연구에서는 스포츠에 대한 관심이 비교적 높은 집단을 대상으로 설문조사를 실시하였다. 선수 브랜드 이미지 (on/off-field), 자아브랜드 연결(self-brand connection), 브랜드 신뢰성, 선수-브랜드 일치성(athlete-brand congruence)을 측정하기 위한 설문지를 구성하였으며 총 319 부를 최종 자료분석에 사용하였다. 자료 분석을 위해 SPSS 25.0 을 활용한 기술통계분석과 신뢰도 분석을 실시하였으며, AMOS 25.0 을 활용하여 확인적 요인분석(CFA)과 타당도 분석을 실시하였다. 가설검증을 위해 구조방정식 모형 분석(SEM)을 실시하였다.

본 연구의 결과는 다음과 같다. 첫째, 선수 브랜드 이미지는 소비자의 자아브랜드 연결 형성에 유의한 영향을 미쳤다. 둘째, 자아브랜드 연결은 브랜드 신뢰성에 유의한 영향력을 미쳤다. 셋째, 선수-브랜드 일치성의 정도는 자아브랜드 연결의 형성에 유의한 영향력을 미치지 않았다. 즉, 선수-브랜드 일치성의 높고 낮음과는 무관하게 스포츠 유명스타의 효과는 긍정적인 것으로 해석되었다.